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Milking Chocolate For Jacques Torres, a Sweet Career Move

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By David Segal

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NEW YORK, Nov. 13 -- That's him! Behind the table, next to the \$8 bag of dark chocolate fortune cookies -- it's Mr. Chocolate himself, Jacques Torres, smiling in a white chef's outfit, surrounded by his brightly packaged confections and hemmed in by fans who want a photograph, or an autograph, or both.

"Can you sign it to my father, Al?" burbles a young lady who has handed over a massive milk chocolate bar and felt-tip pen. Then she sidles next to him as a friend tries to locate the shutter on a disposable camera.

"Merci beaucoup," says Torres, grinning and looking pleased when the flash goes off. Another fan charges at him, this time wielding a bag of his chocolate fortune cookies. And when she's done gushing about how much she loves Torres -- his chocolate, his show on the Food Network, everything! -- someone else pushes in to shake his hand.

There were plenty of crowd-pleasers yesterday at the Chocolate Show, a fragrant paradise occupying 40,000 square feet of space in a downtown venue called the Metropolitan Pavilion. The place was elbow to elbow with choco-freaks, all grazing at 75 different booths. A five-tier chocolate panda was displayed by a company called Mary's Chocolates. There were life-size mannequins wearing chocolate bustiers. A guy named Sid Chidiac was selling paintings that he swears are made of chocolate.

"You can actually eat them," he said, gesturing to colorful rendering of Oprah Winfrey. "I had a client once who asked me to paint her husband because the two of them were getting divorced. Then she had a party and ate him in front of everyone."

But nobody had a crowd like Jacques Torres. The former pastry maestro at New York's Le Cirque restaurant, Torres is not just the



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TV star of "Chocolate With Jacques Torres," not just the winner of many culinary prizes that you have never heard of and not just the author of "Dessert Circus: Extraordinary Desserts You Can Make at Home," among other books, and not just the dean of pastry arts at New York's French Culinary Institute. He is also the owner and creator of a 5,000-square-foot chocolate factory in a fashionable part of Brooklyn, and in about a month, he will open his second chocolate factory, this one near SoHo: 8,000 square feet and rigged so that visitors can watch the creation of his sweets from, as he put it, "from bean to bar."

He's Monsieur Willy Wonka, *s'il vous plait*. But unlike his fictional antecedent, Torres is no recluse. And when we asked for a tour of the Chocolate Show, and the chance to learn, from the master, what to look for in good chocolate, he happily agreed. We have always been under the impression that a Snickers bar is a delicacy, but we get the uneasy sense that an expert like Torres would laugh at that suggestion. If true, we'd like to know why. And make some cheap French jokes at the same time.

But it turns out that there is a problem with this brilliant plan: Torres is basically under siege here. He can't walk more than three feet without being stopped, complimented and fawned over. The god of chocolate in a room where chocolate is worshiped -- it's like trying to browse through the opera section at Tower Records with Pavarotti as a guide.

"It's going to be tough," Torres says, as he gets ready to step from behind his booth. "I don't know."

Torres, 45, was raised in the south of France and has an accent that is so perfect for his profession that it ought to be faked by anyone with a baking sheet. He gives a quick precis of his career, which started when he was 15 and a job in a pastry shop. Then, on a bet, he asked for a staff position with a two-star restaurant in Nice; he moved to the United States, where he worked for the Ritz-Carlton and later for Le Cirque, where his reputation grew like a good soufflé.

"Then four years ago, I decide I was old enough to try business," he says. "So I opened a chocolate manufacturer, and I take a location that is 5,000 square feet and the shop inside is 400 square feet. So that tells you how much more attention I put on the profession than the selling. The store was tiny!"

Ask Torres for the secret to his chocolate and he says there is no secret. Great ingredients, naturally, are essential.

"Buy strawberry that has no flavor and you can be the best pastry chef in the world, [but] whatever you make won't have a good flavor. Chocolate is the same. You need to buy the best ingredients you can afford."

That means the finest beans, real vanilla, not this vanillin junk that you see listed on the back of Hershey's bars and many American offerings. It's a synthetic vanilla, Torres says, a little sniffily. Not his style.

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